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## Commentaries: Neandertal Hotline

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## Robert Perchan

### NEANDERTAL HOTLINE

Their tools were cruder than those of their *Homo sapiens* contemporaries, our ancestors. And there is evidence they could neither speak, except possibly in some proto-language devoid of nuances, sing, nor sign. They couldn't paint and apparently never tried. They were bulky and had heads with all the bone in front, an aesthetic mistake. Few of their remains show signs of no physical strife. They buried their dead. Which was a blessing, for now we better understand them. Their Afterlives.

If you would like to talk to one, dial the number printed on the back of this brochure. You will be able to see her on the screen, but she will not be able to see you. Not with those vacant eye sockets. Keep in mind that with this species sexual dimorphism was not pronounced and we are not always able to guarantee with absolute certainty whether the pelvic bones are those of a female or a male. You will have to take your chances.

They lived a long time ago and we wiped them out, we think. Nevertheless, it is possible some of them interbred with our ancestors. If, for any reason, you suspect that your physical appearance or your manual dexterity or your capacity to carry a tune is not, in any way, up to snuff, don't hesitate to call. We all know at least one person who simply cannot excel. You may be on the road to extinction and not even realize it. If you can get this through your thick skull, call now. And remember, you can say anything you like, and she won't be able to talk back. Complete anonymity is assured. She is waiting for you.

### COMMENTARY

Who were they really? Well, it appears they buried their dead. Made stone tools. Had brains as big as ours. Still, a race of true Others. Not in any existential philosophical sense, but in barebone fact. You could write a novel about a relic population and make them born killers or the world's original Flower Children. Who knows? You could connect them with our fabled Yetis and Sasquatches. Who dare gainsay you? I'm sure there will be a movie, if there hasn't already been. Special effects will be up to it, if the scriptwriters will not. None

of this will satisfy the healthy imagination, beyond the momentary thrill of fanciful speculation.

Intellectually they are an itch that begs to be scratched and then forgotten. An area of specialization for people called paleoanthropologists. Poetically, they are pretty much zip. Zilch. Unless you go in for Really Lost Causes. You could portray them as our bumbling incompetent brother or sister or distant cousin selves, as I suppose was the best I could do.

Insofar as they were like us, they are boring. Insofar as they were truly different, they are unfathomable. What a gulf! And yet is this not the story of so many of our prose poems—the propinquity of the humdrum and the miraculous. The way they nag at each other, like a husband and wife.

But I'm supposed to be commenting on a single prose poem here, not an entire species.

I wrote "Neandertal Hotline" (I'm spelling it in the scientific rather than the popular fashion, to give the whole business an air of rigor) after reading some books about old bones. Most of the time the books were not difficult. They were aimed at the general reader, i.e. the you or me who really should be doing something else, like making sure Darwinian Evolution doesn't suddenly turn around and decide to rub us out.

But more than anything else, I envied the authors of these books. They were smart and confident and articulate and positively exuberant in their interpretation of the significance of the tiniest fragment of a molar. They were *driven* in the best sense of the word. They had *passion*. *Gusto*. And they weren't babbling on about art or literature or God, either. They were talking about an idea so cruel that the heart recoils from its implications—in spite of a century and a half of familiarity with it. Natural Selection. The Universe's dirtiest joke. The most profound inspiration in the annals of the human race.

Nothing new there. But suddenly I wanted to pack up and hop a flight and re-invent myself as a fossil hunter and commune with these superior beings at international conferences and in the field. Or, alternatively, chuck everything and blow my entire meager wad in the bars and stews of some Southeast Asian port city—and in line with the Law spread a good bit of my DNA around to boot. Anything but sit at home and knock out a darkly sardonic prose poem and wait for an end that will come. Unselected, again.